

Student Engagement in Academic Libraries: A Conceptual Framework

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The concept of “student engagement” is widely discussed in academic libraries, but has not been thoroughly examined from a conceptual and theoretical perspective by scholars in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field. This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research project on student engagement in academic libraries. Through in-depth interviews conducted at four academic libraries, and utilizing a flexible coding data analysis strategy, we propose a conceptual framework with antecedents, dimensions, and outcomes. This framework sheds light on the nature of student engagement in academic libraries. The process model can guide student engagement planning, communication, and evaluation efforts in academic libraries.

Introduction

Academic libraries have used different terms to label activities related to promoting patron awareness, attracting users, and building relationships, including publicity, advertising, public relations (PR), marketing, promotion, communications, and, more recently, student engagement—likely influenced by higher education institutions’ emphasis on this concept. However, student engagement has been used to describe so many different types of library activities and students’ interactions with librarians that its meaning has grown less clear over time (Schlak, 2018). In fact, engagement has also been a critical concept in other disciplines in which scholars face similar conceptual challenges. Communication scholars Johnston and Taylor put it well, stating: “When the term engagement is everything, as a consequence, it is nothing” (2018, p. 1). With an underdeveloped concept at the heart of many services and activities, academic libraries’ efforts to engage students may not be as productive as they could be. In particular, with today’s dwindling economic resources and tightening budgets, academic libraries face higher demands for accountability of the value of library services. Having a good definition and stronger theoretical understanding would be the first step in libraries measuring “engagement” effectively.

This paper examines the concept of student engagement in academic libraries (SEAL). The concept was likely borrowed from educational research, in which researchers have described

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it as multiple psychological states, typically involving behavioral/social, emotional/affective, cognitive, and academic/intellectual dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). However, academic libraries tend to perceive SEAL differently from educational/instructional engagement. SEAL is less about students' engagement state (i.e., what can be considered as "being engaged" for an individual) and more often about activities and efforts to encourage students' usage, involvement, and participation in academic libraries. Therefore, we drew from the interpretive approach of engagement research from other disciplines, such as communication studies, to understand SEAL based on data from the field. This approach focuses on the situationality and process of engagement instead of the individual-level state of engagement (Johnston, 2018).

In this paper, we present findings from a qualitative research study on SEAL in four university libraries. We started by asking the following research question: What does engagement mean for librarians and students in academic library settings? Using interviews and the flexible coding method (Deterding & Waters, 2018), we gained a more profound knowledge of SEAL and developed a conceptual framework, including antecedents, dimensions, and outcomes of SEAL, which can serve as a valuable tool for understanding, planning, and assessing student engagement efforts in academic libraries. This paper is one of the few attempts to investigate student engagement in academic libraries from a theoretical perspective.

Literature Review

LIS Literature on Student Engagement

In the early 2010s, the concept of student engagement began to appear frequently in LIS literature. Kuh and Gonyea's (2003) paper, "The Role of the Academic Library in Promoting Student Engagement in Learning," based on the College Student Experiences Questionnaire data, was one of the earliest studies investigating the role of academic libraries in students' educational engagement. They found library experiences were valuable to students but did not contribute to learning engagement as an independent factor. According to some scholars (Díaz, 2014), though, the emphasis on library engagement started with "the engaged model" by Williams (2009), and this shift from "a collection-centered to an engagement-centered model" was driven by librarians' "collective acknowledgment" that their roles needed to change with the environment (Díaz, 2014, p. 225). No matter the origin, the term, in recent years, has replaced or been used interchangeably with terms of similar or related meanings, such as PR and marketing, which were often used from 1980s to the 2000s (e.g., Ford, 1985; Norton, 1984; Tuffield et al., 1991). Similar to the literature on academic libraries' PR and marketing that emphasizes the importance of promoting library services and introduces best practices, most engagement articles are case studies describing experiences from individual institutions (e.g., Arant & Clark, 1999; Dugan, 1994; Taylor, 2002).

Two recent literature reviews cover the field of student engagement in academic libraries. Schlak (2018) provides an in-depth analysis of the most directly relevant literature on engagement, specifically in academic libraries. This review groups library engagement literature into five categories—student learning; citizenship and service-based learning; library as engaging place and space; engagement through technology and programmatic learning experiences; and relational engagement—and connects the LIS literature with several conceptual frameworks on student engagement in the education field, including the behavior-based approach (Kuh & Gonyea, 2003), the psychological approach (Kahu, 2013), and the institutional perspective (Leach & Zepke, 2011). Similarly, Appleton's (2020) literature review starts with the concept

of student engagement in higher education and then organizes the current literature (with a UK focus) by different types of student engagement—learning, partnership and collaboration, and student voice. Clearly, most LIS literature conceptualizes engagement as activities, efforts, and interactions rather than students' states of engagement (such as behavioral, affective, cognitive, and intellectual engagement) as education researchers often do (Axelson & Flick, 2011; Zhoc et al., 2019). The review articles reveal a lack of deep, conceptual, and LIS-specific understanding of SEAL, despite considerable literature on this topic.

A thorough review of the literature on library engagement reveals that students' perspectives on engagement are absent from the two literature reviews. For example, some literature indicates that stereotypes of librarians are still prevalent and that students often do not know what librarians do, nor what their qualifications are (Datig, 2014; Fagan et al., 2021). These misconceptions can lead to students' non-use, or reluctant use, of the library because students might think that librarians are incapable of or are burdened by helping them (Datig, 2014; Fagan et al., 2021). Moreover, some studies on student engagement with libraries and librarians have focused on library anxiety and highlight that many students are still intimidated by academic libraries and librarians (Black, 2016; Jan et al., 2020; Kiilu & Otiike, 2016). Overall, though, students value librarians and library workers when they engage with them (Connaway & Dickey, 2010; Datig, 2014). Many user studies show that libraries are still one of the most heavily used buildings on campuses, and students typically visit and use them frequently (Ojennus & Watts, 2017; Yoo-Lee et al., 2013). The information/user behavior literature also shows that most students are interested in the library as a "place" or "space," primarily for completing tasks such as homework and assignments, preferring to use it as a place to study or seek information, rather than a place to receive assistance (Connaway & Dickey, 2010; Datig, 2014; Lux et al., 2016; Mizrachi, 2010; Yoo-Lee et al., 2013). This may not be the type of engagement that librarians want to achieve, and academic libraries must redefine their roles and combat stereotypes (Connaway & Dickey, 2010; Delaney & Bates, 2015; Fallin, 2016; Kiilu & Otiike, 2016; Sennyey et al., 2009).

Literature on Engagement in other Disciplines

The concept of engagement first emerged in education research in the 1980s (Corno & Mandinach, 1983) and in organizational behavior research in the 1990s (Kahn, 1990). It also became an important construct in several fields, including applied psychology, business, marketing, political science, communication studies, and PR, in which researchers have developed practical and theoretical knowledge. From the beginning, researchers have focused on "engagement as a state," that is, "what it means to be engaged and what an engaged state looks like" (Johnston, 2018, p. 19). For example, Corno and Mandinach (1983) examined students' cognitive engagement in classrooms, and Kahn (1990) studied the physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of employee engagement.

More recent research employs "interpretivist and constructionist approaches" to study engagement as a socially-situated process (Johnston, 2018, p. 19). For a typical example, Dhanesh (2017) proposes a model of engagement that consists of "antecedent" (i.e., salience of issue to publics and organization), "states" (i.e., affective, cognitive, behavioral, and the whole self/group), and "consequences" (i.e., meeting respective goals of interacting publics and organizations). Similarly, Weitzl and Einwiller's (2018) customer engagement framework comprises "drivers" (e.g., customer-based factors such as personalities and goals), "engagement" (i.e., psychological and behavior engagements), and "outcomes" for different stakeholders.

Engagement researchers in various disciplines have developed different antecedent-state-consequence models to reveal the nature of domain-specific engagements (Kosiba et al., 2018; Saffer, 2018; Saks, 2006; Uysal, 2018). Such models are presented as a process, in which certain conditions or factors are considered antecedents, and certain results are considered consequences or outcomes. They often include cognitive, affective, and behavioral states as analytical dimensions, and sometimes further discuss the intensity of engagement. Most of these models and analyses focus on what Johnston (2018) described in their engagement taxonomy as individual (micro) level of engagement analysis; little has been done on the collective or social (macro) level of analysis. Johnston argues, from a system perspective, that social or collective-level engagement consists of antecedents, strategies, and outcomes, that antecedents are organizational goals, communication serves as strategies, and that the outcomes are social/collective-level engagement. When conceptualizing the dimensions and attributes of engagement in their comprehensive “multilevel model of communication engagement,” Johnston still uses the common states—cognitive, behavioral, and affective (2018, pp. 29-30). However, their system perspective offers a useful approach in analyzing SEAL in its unique context.

Research Design

This research study is qualitative in nature, with data collected from in-depth interviews with librarians and students in four large research universities located in the Midwest, Northeast, South, and Southeast of the United States. We recruited and interviewed 80 participants, including 23 librarians and 57 students. The librarian participants held positions in public services, administration, and library communication. The students included 47 undergraduate students and ten graduate students from various disciplines. We used a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix) with open-ended questions to gather insights from both groups regarding the roles of libraries and librarians, their interactions, and the effectiveness of communication efforts.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all researchers participated in the interview and coding processes. We used an innovative coding method developed by Deterding and Waters (2018) in sociology called “flexible coding:” they argued that social researchers seldom conduct research in a purely “grounded theory” way as it is unrealistic not to review the literature and have some understanding of the theories and practices of the phenomenon before beginning the study. Most research is a combination of inductive and deductive approaches conducted by multiple researchers (coders), and the flexible coding method is a reflection of this search practice (Deterding & Waters, 2018). Adapting this approach, we conducted the group coding in the following steps.

The first step was indexing and rough coding. We indexed the interviews using major questions and significant themes in the interview protocol, including perceptions of libraries/librarians, the definition of engagement, communication, ideal relationship, etc. These themes reflected the researchers’ initial, intuitive understanding of SEAL. These indexes served as the broad codes that would be examined in more depth later (Deterding & Waters, 2018). We also wrote participant-level, analytical memos that recorded our overall impressions and conceptual themes, and even codes, if any. This process was similar to, but much rougher than, the open coding process in a typical grounded theory study. At the end of this step, we discussed our impressions of the data, examined the codes found in the data and identified from the literature (e.g., cognitive engagement, affective engagement, intellectual engagement,

behavioral engagement, library as space, etc.), and identified the most promising themes to explore in the next step.

In the second step, “data reduction,” each of us performed coding on a few themes identified in the first step. For example, one researcher focused on librarians’ definition of engagement and their perceptions of the librarian-student relationship; one focused on the theme of “library space”; another took the theme of students’ usage of and feeling towards libraries; a third looked at students’ perceptions of librarians and librarians’ views of students. We coded each chunk of data using the codes we had developed in the first step while developing new codes through open coding before moving on to the next few themes/chunks. At the end of this step, we had developed over 150 codes, and all researchers gained more familiarity with all the interview transcripts, or at least certain parts of each transcript.

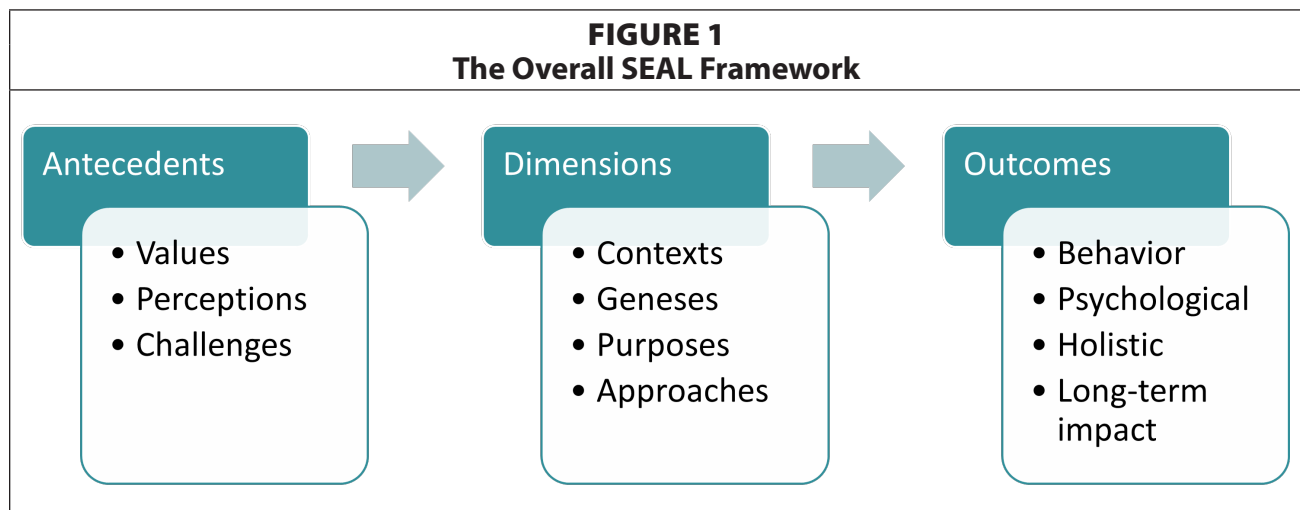
In the third step, the research team examined, discussed, and categorized all the codes. Deduplicating and defining codes was straightforward, but developing the conceptual framework to theorize engagement took intense discussions, many rounds of card sorting, and literature re-reading. We collapsed the codes into a dozen categories and began to outline a prototype of the framework. This work eventually produced the codebook, including definitions and instructions, as the framework prototype.

In the last step, we re-coded all the interview transcripts in a more granular manner to test and refine the prototype. This step was similar to the theoretical coding process in the grounded theory approach. We refined the codes through discussions among researchers before finalizing the analytical framework presented in the next section of this paper.

The Framework for Student Engagement in Academic Libraries (SEAL)

Overview of the Framework: Antecedents, Dimensions, and Outcomes

Drawing from engagement literature in other disciplines, especially communication studies, we conceptualize student engagement in academic libraries as an antecedents-dimensions-outcomes model shown in Figure 1. Antecedents refer to the conditions, factors, or drivers of engagement; for example, many factors have been identified as antecedents of consumer engagement, such as participation, involvement, benefits, and personalities (Brodie et al., 2011; Weitzl & Einwiller, 2018). Dimensions represent the essential conceptual components of engagement, typically encompassing the states of engagement explained in previous sections. “Outcomes” and “consequences” are used interchangeably in the literature to indicate the



results or influences of engagement, such as the “meaning making and relationship outcome” emphasized by Johnston (2018, p. 25). In our proposed model, we use “outcomes” instead of consequences because this term fits our findings as well as the terminology in the library and education settings (e.g., learning outcomes).

When analyzing engagement using a process model, studies across various domains often consider the states (e.g., cognitive, affective, etc.) or levels (e.g., low versus high) of engagement of individuals or groups as the analytical component between the antecedents and the consequences. Our interview data show, however, librarians define and perceive engagement in a unique manner. Librarians play a crucial role in student engagement and often act as the initiators and activators, while students are often passive, especially in the digital era when academic libraries’ functions are less visible. As a result, librarians tend to view engagement as a process that occurs at the collective level, with librarians making efforts to engage with a greater number of students, rather than stress each student’s psychological state. In other words, they envision the broader impacts on the student body on their campuses through the engagement efforts, instead of focusing on the psychological effects of such efforts on each individual, even though they do offer personalized, one-on-one services routinely. Therefore, a unique conceptual framework is needed to reflect how engagement is used in our field. Johnston’s (2018) collective-level engagement perspective, with antecedents, strategies, and outcomes, is helpful because, in the process of SEAL, engagement is more about situations, methods, and actions. We argue that the state of engagement is better described as outcomes in the engagement process. This finding is consistent with Schlak’s view of student engagement as “an outcome of the library’s efforts” (2018).

Based on data gathered in this study, we define Student Engagement in Academic Libraries (SEAL) as a multidimensional process (with contexts, geneses, purposes, and approaches, detailed in 4.3) that involves efforts from multiple stakeholders, including librarians and students. This process is driven by the alignment of the values, actions, and perceptions of both stakeholders, with the hope of achieving various engagement outcomes. The states of engagement (i.e., what can be called “being engaged,” which is often considered as dimensions or attributes of engagement in other fields) are presented as “outcomes” in this framework. “Being engaged” is defined in the study as a state *and* behavior beyond students’ general usage and interaction with/in academic libraries; rather, it means being involved and being active—a combination of behavioral and psychological factors.

In this section, we describe the key components of the SEAL framework using evidence from the interview data, highlighting a few noteworthy themes or findings in each component.

Antecedents

The antecedents of SEAL are specified in Table 1. Emphasizing both stakeholders involved in SEAL, our model suggests the antecedents are the alignment of the two parties’ values, perceptions, and actions. Regarding values and actions, librarians’ core values have always centered on serving their academic community, and they have consistently provided a wide range of services to their patrons, particularly faculty and students. While facing increasing pressure to demonstrate their worth to the community and beyond, librarians have managed to maintain the vigor of their traditional services and values. As for university students, the antecedents of SEAL stem from their desire to succeed and thrive in the academic environment as well as their recognition of libraries as a valuable resource. Although general use or

TABLE 1
Antecedents of Student Engagement in Academic Libraries

	Students	Librarians
Values	Desire to thrive	Serving academic community
Actions	General library use	Traditional library services
Perceptions	Perceptions and misperceptions of libraries and librarians based on prior experience	Knowledge of students' needs and their perceptions and misperceptions of libraries and librarians

visitation, which most students will experience, may or may not lead to engagement, such actions can pave the way for SEAL.

Our analysis also revealed that perceptions are a key antecedent of engagement. Whether or not they use the library, students generally view academic libraries as an essential component of the university. However, their perceptions of libraries and librarians vary depending on their current and past experiences, cultural beliefs, and other factors. Librarians are well aware of outdated or incorrect perceptions, as illustrated by the following quote from one librarian:

I know there are still people who have the stereotype of librarian as an old lady with glasses and hair up in a bun, and it's really funny because I've had students and people around town, I tell them what I do, and they say "You're a librarian?" "Yes!" "But you don't seem all buttoned up!"

As a user-centered profession, librarians have comprehensive knowledge of students' needs, perceptions, and misperceptions. This knowledge was vital in the development of SEAL, which has emerged as a significant trend in the academic world. As such, an integral aspect of SEAL, at least at present, involves demonstrating the roles of librarians and correcting any misperceptions held by students. Without this understanding, SEAL would not have achieved its current prominence and success across so many academic libraries.

Dimensions

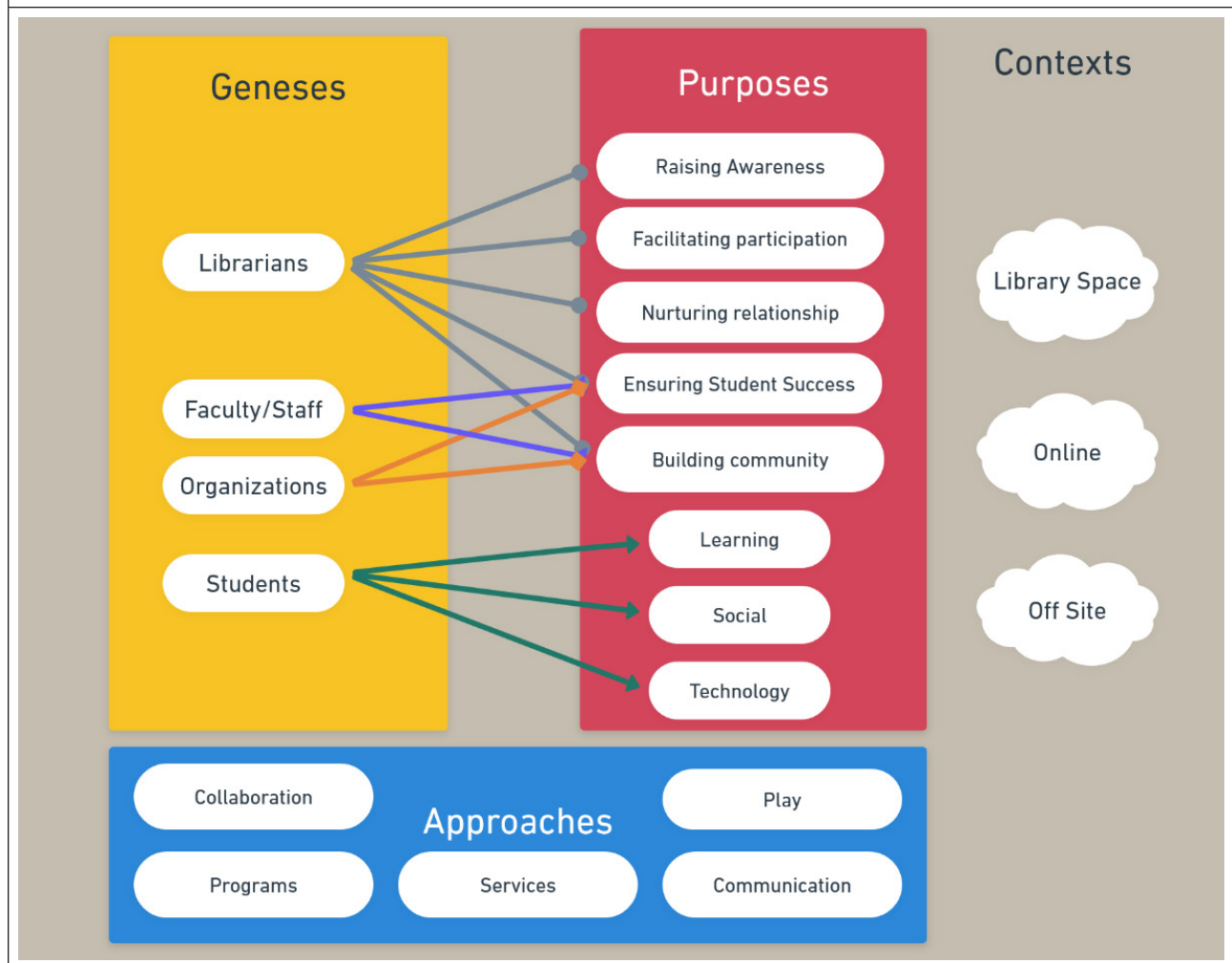
The four interrelated and interdependent dimensions of SEAL, as shown in Figure 2, were identified from interviews with librarians and students. In this section, we specify the definition of each dimension with quotes from the interview data.

Contexts

SEAL happens in various contexts, including online via the library website, in the physical library space, and offsite with librarians' involvement. SEAL typically happens during student learning, social activities, or technology usage. Context is an essential dimension in SEAL because it affects why and how students engage in academic libraries and, therefore, strategies librarians use to engage students.

Library space is a topic that nearly every participant brought up in the interview, except a few students who rarely visited libraries. Students emphasized library space as a major reason for visiting libraries. Although most students use the library space to concentrate

FIGURE 2
The SEAL Dimensions



on their studies or use technological resources—which is consistent with many library user studies—our data echo the trend that academic libraries are used increasingly as social spaces where students can relax and hang out with friends. One student said:

The physical library serves more as a social place instead of work and study and like actually getting books. So like, the library is mainly digital for me, but the physical library is more of a social space where I can sit and hang out.

The word “library” is increasingly used as a metaphor for accessing resources, although most students, especially undergraduates, still associate libraries with physical books and knowledge.

Librarians recognized how students value the library space while noticing the limitation of this association between studying and libraries. Correspondingly, many of them have developed different strategies for “physical” engagement. On the one hand, they create innovative and inclusive spaces that support learning, social activities, and even recreational needs. These spaces allow students to experience the modern academic library’s functions and explore potential engagement opportunities.” One librarian said:

I do see a shift from the old traditional idea of libraries to libraries as a space for everyone, whether you're learning or reading or studying or creating or just wanting to talk to someone and catch up. It's really a space for everyone.

On the other hand, librarians try to untangle the concepts of library and librarians with the physical space, especially during the pandemic, mainly by promoting online access to library resources and by taking services to other places on campus.

Geneses

The genesis dimension describes who initiates or makes the first move toward SEAL. In an ideal world, students would engage proactively with academic libraries. One librarian commented on the ideal, two-way relationship between students and libraries:

I would really like to see it as a warm, positive relationship, like one that they think of the library and it's instantly a positive association. That's a safe space that I can go, it's a space for me to go learn, or study, or play, or create, or meet up with some friends. That's really the type of association that I want our patrons to have with the library.

In reality, however, librarians often “still struggle to communicate to undergraduates who we are” and “still get students that will say, oh, I've never been here before.”

Through interviews, we identified five main geneses—librarians, students, faculty, staff (typically student advisors), and other campus organizations. They can be considered stakeholders in engagement efforts, but some initiators may or may not play an active role in SEAL. For example, many undergraduate students use resources in academic libraries or seek help from librarians because their professors or advisors ask them to use the library for academic purposes such as learning, writing, or research. In this case, faculty and staff are the geneses of SEAL but are not involved. In other cases, faculty members, especially those in the humanities disciplines, collaborate closely with librarians and actively engage students in the library settings. Similarly, student organizations and other campus organizations sometimes collaborate with the library to hold events and contribute to SEAL in addition to their own goals.

Librarians are often the genesis of SEAL through various programs, events, and activities, which is described in the approach dimension. Students themselves, although often passive, are also initiators of engagement. Many librarian participants shared instances where students approached them and had meaningful conversations. According to one student, “I always got [information about the library] from word of mouth from other students, you know like this is a really great place to go or talk to this person,” indicating that students are initiating engagement even amongst themselves. While simple use does not always lead to deep engagement, this shows that students do take the initiative to interact with their libraries, even when they are not required to do so.

Purpose

Most students could not articulate their engagement with libraries and librarians beyond basic usage and general sentiments. Their descriptions of their relationship with libraries were usually vague and superficial—they simply had not pondered this topic. However, it is

not difficult to identify the purposes of students who engage with or intend to engage with academic libraries from the interview data. Most student participants mentioned they used or even engaged with libraries for learning, social activities, and technological needs; for example, many students came to libraries because of the “quiet and comfortable” environment or “a good place to hang out with friends.” It is worth repeating that our interviews indicate that simply using libraries does not mean being engaged; rather, only frequent, prolonged, or meaningful use may lead to engagement outcomes. In addition, our conversations with students sometimes indicated a sense of community in the library space. For example, one student said:

I don't feel left out because in a library everyone's on their own and unlike other places, um, in other places people usually sit in groups. Maybe I would feel isolated then, but in the library I don't ... [T]he environment around me makes me focus on just me and my work and I don't feel isolated.

There was a sense of being “alone together” — students feeling connected through shared space while engaging in individual activities — among some of these students. Seeking a sense of community plays a vital role in students' engagement efforts.

With the mission of serving the academic community, librarians' engagement efforts have more specific purposes, though librarians are not always explicit about these purposes and expected outcomes. From the many accounts and examples of “engagement activities,” we identified five interrelated purposes specified below:

Raising awareness. Lack of awareness is the main obstacle of SEAL, and librarians found it critical to capture students' attention and to communicate their roles and values to students. One librarian participant used makerspace as an example; even though “makerspace” has been a buzzword in the library field for quite a few years, the participant said: “there are a surprising number who have no idea what you mean when you say makerspace, and that's, again, another hurdle for us.” Librarians understand it takes time to promote the range of services and resources their libraries offer. “The biggest challenge of student engagement,” another participant commented, “is making them recognize all the things we can do for them.” In particular, “students [don't] even realize the value [of electronic resources] until they graduate, and they can't access [those resources].” Raising awareness is the most frequently mentioned purpose of SEAL in our interviews.

Facilitating participation. Participation is one step further than awareness, and it involves not only informational “marketing” but promoting involvement using various strategies. It is based on librarians' observation that, once students start frequenting the library, they tend to get involved in these events and start participating in them. Although not all students would come, “when it works, it really does work — it's just a matter of getting people to those presentations,” a librarian asserted.

Ensuring student success. Many engagement efforts have the direct purpose of ensuring student success. Not surprisingly, many programs are designed to advance academic knowledge. Librarians believe SEAL can promote students' overall engagement with learning and academic experiences. Meanwhile, “student success” is increasingly conceptualized holistically. The measure of success no longer hinges upon grade point average (GPA) and graduation rates; rather, aspects such as a student's career readiness, mental health, and

physical well-being are progressively incorporated into the definition of success. Library participants reported increasing numbers of programs and activities that aimed at students' personal development or well-being as part of the student success, providing "opportunities to develop their whole person, develop intellectually, emotionally, maybe even spiritually, artistically, [and] creatively."

Building community. Librarian participants often mentioned "community" in our conversations. Beyond learning and services, they are promoting the role of academic libraries as a community center, using the library space to foster dialogue among all stakeholders and building community. As one librarian put it:

I can think more globally about the library's spaces, services, and different engagement, and really help, I don't want to say lead, but I like to think of it as facilitate kind of those conversations about engagement with students and faculty, and help faculty kind of see the place as learning and teaching space.

Nurturing relationship. Participants believe there should be a "give-and-take" and mutually trusting and beneficial relationship between students and librarians beyond customer service. Librarians see themselves as integral to campus life and believe students should come to them without hesitation; therefore, fostering these ideal relationships becomes the purpose of many engagement activities. Our data suggest that students often desire a mutually beneficial relationship with their libraries, even though many could not explicate what that looked like beyond a safe, comfortable place in which to study or access resources.

Approaches

In this study, we identified SEAL as a two-way effort from stakeholders, especially students and librarians. In terms of "how," students are often passive in this process, while librarians use multiple strategies to increase the degree of student engagement. The following five approaches used by both parties were identified from the interview data.

Services. Traditional library services are important approaches to engaging students—after all, learning is a major reason why students visit their libraries. Many librarian participants emphasized their endeavor to connect students with knowledge and resources through information literacy classes, reference services, student orientations, technology workshops, equipment checkout, special-topic lectures, and other regular services, with a mindset of "we are here to help students," and in the hope that the services would lead to more usage and meaningful engagement.

However, services are not unidirectional. The LIS literature provides examples of "citizenship and service-based learning" where students gained engagement by helping libraries (Meyer & Miller, 2008; Schlak, 2018). Our interviews also reveal several common ways in which students offer services to libraries. For example, some libraries had committees with student members, some used student liaisons to help with library projects and outreach, and others had informal mechanisms to seek student help and input. Students who have served in their libraries are among those who are most engaged and often become formal or informal library ambassadors or advocates.

Programs. Much like the literature on SEAL that reports various engagement activities, we collected a long list of library engagement programs from our interviews, including many

innovative activities based on each library's unique circumstances. For example, librarians utilized music, art, food, workout equipment, plants, seeds, service animals, and other unconventional resources to draw students into the libraries and to generate interest in libraries. Librarians created special programs, exhibits, and events, such as game nights, panels, poetry readings, writing competitions, and campaigns on current issues. Among the students we interviewed, many were unaware of those programs; however, those who were aware of them often felt intrigued by what libraries could offer, and those who participated in library programs tended to engage in various aspects of academic libraries.

Collaboration. Collaboration is the main approach the other two genres (faculty/staff and other campus organizations) contribute to SEAL. Many librarian participants also spoke of the importance of successful collaboration with faculty members and partnership with other academic and non-academic units on campus that led to more student awareness, participation, and engagement. Many of them found it "most successful" when they could "involve professors who bring in their classes and integrate it into the curriculum." A participant said:

I find that if faculty value the library and information literacy and robust research skill they will mention the library. If they bring the library into their class, whether it's a one shot or a series of visits, ... a certain population of the students will hear that and take that to heart and then investigate on their own and see the library has workshops.

One librarian also gave us an example of how several on- and off-campus organizations collaborated with the library to create a series of events on social justice and contributed to both students' social awareness and the local community's well-being. In such collaborative efforts, all stakeholders benefit, while SEAL is enhanced.

Play. It is no surprise that students hang out with their peers in academic libraries. Learning, playing, and socializing are common ways students engage with the library space. One creative approach that many academic libraries currently use is to engage students through unconventional methods or playful engagement (Sukovic et al., 2011). Unlike traditional academically-oriented library programming, the purpose of playful engagement is not necessarily course-related. Instead, raising awareness and building community are often the primary goals. One librarian said when they talked about a playful event, "... there's not educational motivation behind it ... I guess our hidden motivation is to get them to come to the library. But during that time, there's no agenda other than let's have fun." Fun activities like gaming and stress-free interactions between librarians and students offer excellent opportunities to address students' misperceptions of libraries and librarians. Students participating in these activities are more likely to see libraries as community centers. However, some administrations have resisted this approach, and not all librarians considered it appropriate for their libraries. Nonetheless, even the more "traditional" librarian participants valued building informal relationships with students through casual interactions, which led to more proactive engagement.

Communication. Like other approaches to SEAL, communication is not one-way marketing or promotion from libraries. Some students, for instance, engaged with their librarians after an information literacy session or a successful event. Communication is crucial

for librarians in SEAL settings, considering the purposes often involve increasing students' awareness of libraries' resources and services. From their perspectives, traditional and social media communication are both challenging in the current academic environment, with many competing sources for students' attention. Most students we interviewed were unaware of libraries' emails, nor did they follow their libraries' social media accounts. Word-of-mouth is still the most frequent communication channel, and physical signs and posts are more effective because serendipitous encounters, such as "just walking by" is a common way students find library activities.

Outcomes

As mentioned, existing engagement research often treats behavioral, cognitive, and affective engagements as the dimensions of engagement, but our data indicate that these states are more often associated with outcomes. For instance, students may engage more after frequent usage and interactions with librarians, and librarians expect their efforts/activities will lead to students' engagement to various degrees. Therefore, based on the data, we identified the following broad outcomes (beyond the specific results of "purposes") in SEAL.

Behavioral Engagement

Although some library literature and some study participants define engagement as general library usage, we consider it as an antecedent. Additionally, behavioral engagement, as an outcome, is defined more narrowly here; it refers to active, meaningful, and intentional uses and interactions resulting from the awareness or appreciation of libraries' and librarians' values. For example, attending an event and passing along library information to peers may or may not constitute engagement, depending on the student's cognitive and affective state.

We found two attributes often associated with behavioral engagement—duration and frequency, based on which SEAL can be roughly categorized as transactional, transitory, occasional, frequent, and ongoing engagement. This categorization could be a starting point in examining degrees, levels, or intensity of SEAL. Due to space, this paper does not discuss these attributes.

Psychological Engagement

Cognitive engagement and affective/emotional engagement are discussed extensively in the literature. In this study, we also found ample evidence of these psychological states. Student participants often used words like appreciation, positive, love, belonging, and respect to describe their *feelings* of engagement, while librarian participants tended to focus more on *cognitive* attributes like awareness, recognition, understanding, support, and advocacy. More notably, engagement efforts (from both parties) have led to the correction of misunderstandings and stereotypes. For example, a student said:

I always expected librarians to like, you know, like the stereotype, the older lady with glasses on so, like, knowing that they're those type of people and they're like really energetic and like really easy to talk to, they're not going be like the ladies in the movies who are like shhhhh, so it's like I don't know. It made it, made them, more ... feel more welcoming. You know, like feel more welcoming.

Holistic Engagement

Some librarian participants talked about their “small group of very active students” who were highly engaged in library activities and established a bond with their librarians. Librarians view themselves as playing many roles, including teacher, counselor, therapist, and community touchstone, in the hope of achieving a high-level, holistic student engagement where academic libraries are integral to students’ university experiences.

Long-Term Impact

Since our interviews with students only included current students of participating libraries, we did not gather direct evidence for the long-term impact of SEAL. However, some students mentioned their intention to give back to both their universities and libraries—a sign of a long-term outcome. Outreach librarians talked about how alums continued to contribute to and participate in library activities after graduation, which may demonstrate the outcomes of SEAL. Indeed, evaluating the impact of SEAL over time would be valuable but, as one librarian participant stated, “harder to calibrate because young people, their memories aren’t as good.” Nevertheless, future research on engagement and perception could demonstrate outcomes of academic libraries’ collective efforts in engaging their publics.

Discussion

Academic libraries need an overall approach to and theoretical understanding of student engagement. The engagement literature in other disciplines, such as communication studies and customer research, helped us identify SEAL as a process with antecedents and outcomes rather than focusing only on psychological and behavioral states (Johnston, 2018; Weitzl & Einwiller, 2018). However SEAL has unique characteristics—most notably, the role of librarians in SEAL is prominent, which means any framework without emphasizing librarians’ roles would be incomplete. The SEAL framework is grounded in interview data and reflects how engagement is perceived in the field. Since it not only zooms in on the engagement as a phenomenon but also considers both sides of the coin—librarians’ and students’ views—it is useful from both theoretical and practical perspectives. In addition, we borrowed the flexible coding method from sociology, which may contribute to the LIS methodology.

The LIS literature provides ample evidence of academic librarians’ engagement efforts, but the various definitions may give the impression that almost all library activities can be considered engagement (Appleton, 2020; Schlak, 2018). The in-depth interviews in this study and the close examination of the data indicate that SEAL is strategic, student-focused, intentional, and outcome-oriented, without all librarians realizing it and expressing it explicitly. As a process, SEAL consists of conditions, situations, multiple dimensions, and anticipated outcomes. As a state or states, engagement is more than using library space/resources and interacting with other people in the library; it is a combination of behavioral engagement and psychological state, including cognitive and affective aspects. This conceptualization is a starting point for more theoretical research of engagement, not only for student engagement but other stakeholders such as faculty, staff, and alums, as well as research in various types of libraries, especially public libraries.

In a practical sense, several findings in this study have potential applications in academic libraries regarding planning, assessment, and marketing. Taking into consideration all four dimensions of SEAL—contexts, geneses, purposes, and approaches—librarians could make

their engagement efforts more strategic and goal-oriented to achieve specific purposes and various levels of outcomes. For instance, different contexts and purposes may require different communication strategies: playful engagement may work especially well for raising awareness and building community, whereas partnership with faculty and advisors can be effective beyond academic activities. Moreover, the process framework may help librarians design appropriate methods to assess the effects of engagement in different contexts, with purposes and outcomes more explicitly stated. Instead of simply saying, “activity X can help the library engage more students,” the librarian could develop a more elaborate purpose, approach, and outcome statement. For another example, librarians should consider the specific behavioral and affective outcomes for planning and evaluation, and should assign them different weights when assessing activities with different purposes, such as facilitating participation and nurturing relationships.

The SEAL framework also provides insights into the challenges faced by academic libraries. The dimensions of the framework, such as the purposes and approaches, reveal the asymmetry of roles in the engagement process, with librarians acting as givers and students as takers. Despite persistent efforts, misperceptions of libraries and librarians still exist (Connaway & Dickey, 2010; Fagan et al., 2021) and remain a barrier to SEAL. Additionally, universities today offer a plethora of learning and social resources, while academic libraries’ status as “the heart of the university” (Leupp, 1924, p. 193) becomes less apparent. As a result, students often do not prioritize library use, let alone engagement; librarians, therefore, often have to find innovative ways to “compete” with other learning/social resources on campus for students’ attention. Collaboration with faculty members, for example, is widely used as a strategic way to reach students (Díaz, 2014), but it is insufficient. The gaps between the SEAL purposes of students and librarians mean there is a long way to go before SEAL can achieve overarching outcomes.

The overall process approach has its drawbacks in this study. Since the SEAL framework stresses engagement efforts and deemphasizes the individual state in outcomes, it does not include quantitative measurement of outcomes, which needs to be further explored in future research. In particular, we notice that frequency and duration are closely related to the state of engagement but do not define the level, degree, or intensity of engagement based on these aspects. Students need to be actively involved in academic libraries to be called “being engaged,” but how active is “active” enough, and how involved is involved enough to be called “engagement?” Some participants hinted at the observations of different levels of engagement, yet the interviews show an overall lack of careful consideration of different attributes of engagement. Answering these questions will help librarians develop a deeper understanding and better evaluation methods. More empirical evidence is also needed to answer such questions.

Conclusion

The topic of student engagement has been a subject of much discussion in academic library literature, but it remains a somewhat ambiguous concept. This paper seeks to address this issue by examining SEAL (Student Engagement in Academic Libraries) from a conceptual and theoretical perspective. Through this research, we aim to provide valuable insights into this complex topic and lay the groundwork for further exploration and understanding of SEAL and related issues in the library field. These related issues include public perceptions of libraries, academic libraries’ roles within and relationship with their parent institutions, and the

effectiveness of libraries' communications, just to name a few. As we navigate a post-COVID world, the ways in which libraries engage with students are more fluid than ever. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge that SEAL is an ever-changing construct, much like other services provided by academic libraries. In conclusion, this research represents a critical step forward in our understanding of student engagement in academic libraries. By providing a conceptual framework, we can more effectively plan, communicate, and evaluate our efforts to engage students and support their success.

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Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Questions for Librarians

- Hospitals would call people who come in as patients; what do you call people who come to libraries? What words would you use to describe them?
- What does student engagement mean to you?
- What efforts do you make to engage students?
- How effective have those efforts been? How do you evaluate the outcome or effectiveness?
- In your opinion, what is the most important service/part the library provides students? Why?
- To what extent do you think students value the idea/concept of “student engagement?”
- What are the challenges you have encountered in engaging students?
- Can you take a guess, what the students think about the university library? How do they think about the librarians?
- Do you think the university library is doing a good job with communications? Especially communications with the students?
- How do you view the relationship between the university library and the students?
- How do you view your own relationship with the students?
- What’s the ideal relationship between library/librarians and students? What are the key factors/elements/aspects for such an ideal relationship?
- To what extent do you think the library-students relationship here matches the ideal relationship you previously mentioned?
- To what extent do you think the library listens to students’ voices, needs, suggestions, or complaints?
- Do you think the library meets the needs and expectations of students?

Questions for Students

- When you hear the word “library,” what are the words/things/images that come to your mind first?
- Could you recall your last few visits or other usages (e.g., website, databases, online chat) of the library? Did you have to go/use or want to go/use? Do you feel engaged? How so? (And follow up with specific questions about these visits and usages, especially the engagement aspect.)
- How do you feel when you are in the library? / How do you feel when you use library resources?
- What words would you use to describe the relationship between you and your libraries/librarians? Why?
- Have you interacted with librarians? How often? What made you interact/ not interact with them?
- What do you think librarians do for their work?
- How much do you think the librarians value you as part of the university community?
- How important do you think the library is to your success?
- Do you follow/friend any library social media? Websites? Why/why not?
- Have you participated in library workshops, exhibits, or other events/activities? If not, why?

- How would you evaluate the library's engagement efforts?
- Do you think the library meets the needs and expectations of students, including yourself?
- Any comments for the library to improve students' engagement and experience? Or other comments?